



WESTERN NEWS

JUN 5, 02

Don't mistake determination to solve asbestos problem

To the Editor:

I find that I must respond to the letter to the editor, written by Mr. D.C. Orr, entitled "Town loses character if it succumbs to 'Victim' label," which appeared in *The Western News*, May 24, 2002.

First I must say that the people at W.R. Grace headquarters must have been extremely pleased with this rhetoric.

I would like to address some of the statements Mr. Orr makes. His statement: "We should unite to expedite the clean-up that has been forced upon this town so that we can put this doubtful period behind us and move on with our lives." Yes, we should unite to get this clean-up done as quickly and thoroughly as possible, the sooner we get a clean bill of health, the sooner our town recovers from this nightmare. "Forced" upon us? Yes, by the mining companies that reaped the profits at the expense of our lives and our environment. "Forced" on us by the need to have tax revenues going into the government coffers. "Forced" upon us by the protective agencies that turned their backs on us.

Mr. Orr's words: "while we wallow in grief and self-pity." My response: The people in this exposed population are entitled to their grief and a little self-pity; this should not be confused with our anger and determination to solve the many complex problems that we face.

Mr. Orr's statement: "it doesn't take much effort to terrorize the timid and make this look bigger, more complex and more dangerous than it really is." My response: In the past 2 years, I have put forth much effort to cure my ignorance that allowed myself and those I

love and care about to be exposed to a most dangerous toxic mineral fiber. I refuse to wallow in my ignorance and I would encourage those who read, to challenge their minds, learn about this mineral fiber and the health effects resulting from exposure. Take charge of your own destiny, your own future. Cure the ignorance that allowed, and continues to allow, W.R. Grace to terrorize us with their lies. Ignorance and lies will only fuel the denial that many in the community wish to hold on to. This really is big, and this really is real.

Mr. Orr's words: "I think it cheapens all of us to present ourselves as too unsophisticated to have seen the risks we were taking. We took those risks knowingly, we are paying the price for attempting to direct our own lives." My response: Prior to 1956 there existed an innocent ignorance of any problem of toxic mineral fiber killing people. In 1956, the State of Montana did a mineral analysis of the dust emitted from this mining operation - high levels of tremolite asbestos fibers were found to be present. From that point forward, some people became responsible. The rights of the individual were set aside so that the privileges of a select group of people focused on triumph and greed, could line their pockets.

Some people did know of the dangers, but they lied to the people of Libby, they lied through omission. They failed to share vital information and in time, (a quarter of a century later) shared minimizing-half-truths - lies. We did not commonly know the risks of living in Libby while the mine operated, and we are paying the price of having a select few direct our lives.

Our ignorance of the truth should not be confused with being less than sophisticated. No one held a gun to my father's head, and generations of other family members, and made them work at the mine, and no one forced anyone to live in Libby during mine operation years. But, no one told us the truth either. My dad was dead at the age of 64 due to his asbestos exposure.

Mr. Orr's words: "It's time to look to God, not government, for our blessings and protection."

My response: Agreed! That said, I thank God for the blessing of providing the intelligence and caring to some people in government that had the insight to tighten regulations on asbestos in the 70's, finally resulting in the shut down of the mining operation on the grossly contaminated Vermiculite Mountain in 1990. Fiber emissions, at every phase of mining operation, were so high that there was no feasible way for W.R. Grace to hope to comply with the permissible exposure level in occupational regulations and in addition, sales of the contaminated product dropped off due to hazardous labeling requirements. The mine is shut down, we have one less battle to fight.

Mr. Orr says: "We are in danger of losing the character of our town if we succumb to the parasitic culture of the 'victim' at a time when the eyes of the nation are upon us."

My response: I do not have a lawsuit pending against anyone. In part, why I don't is I figured that sooner or later someone would come forward with criticism toward

those who think they have been poisoned and think they should be compensated for being put at risk of disease. People who believe, and many who know for certain that their health has been compromised and think that rather than lose their life's efforts to the paying of medical expenses, they should be compensated with a medical coverage designed to offset the perceived shortened lifespan. Compensated with research effort, we need answers now. I think that labeling our fellow citizens as a "parasitic culture" is just a bit harsh.

Is it greed? I would just point out the fact that the corporations felt free to exercise their greed upon us. In my view, the exposed people of Libby "should be" compensated by those who knew - the responsible and the irresponsible. We can be assured that if no one is held accountable, if no one has to pay, such tragedies will occur again and many similar tragedies occurring elsewhere will continue to go unaddressed.

I said I don't have a lawsuit pending, that will change as soon as possible. I intend to help the cause by suing them - those responsible and those irresponsible - into the reality that what happened to the people in Libby is unacceptable.

Finally, it is my view that not one dime that comes to the citizens of this exposed population should ever be considered a hand-out, contribution, donation or aid. Rather, this should be viewed as humanitarian compensation.

Clinton Maynard